

Under the shadow of silence

On speechless love in *King Lear*

Steven Groarke


I must admit that reading Steven Groarke's chapter that follows has left me, well, speechless. Indeed, it is this – the emphasis on speechlessness – on silence that is, in so many ways, the very thrust of this paper – specifically Cordelia's silence in Shakespeare's King Lear which, as the author writes, "leaves 'nothing' (as it were) to speak for itself".

Groarke's is certainly a complex and demanding paper, but then again so is the subject matter – Cordelia's "broken speech of a love unutterable" which stands as silent/compassionate witness to her father's suffering. Hers is a 'gratuitous' love in the most transcendent or religious sense of the word. Drawing on the significance of this gesture, the author lends new meaning to the original title of our book as he writes, "Together, witness and response remain a hard act to follow".

... love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds.

Shakespeare, *Sonnets*, 116, ll. 2–3

Cordelia is the hard act to follow in *King Lear*. Lear's purgation stands in all its tumultuous magnificence as among Shakespeare's greatest achievements. The redemptive force of the play, however, derives explicitly from the ordeal of Cordelia's silent witness. We sense that Cordelia is in touch with something other than what we are able to make of her, precisely at the point where she falls silent. In developing and demonstrating this

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claim, I shall focus on an underlying conflict of interpretation in Shakespearean criticism, a conflict that has far-reaching implications for our understanding of literature and its value. In particular, I propose to consider the conflict between psychological (Freudian) and poetical interpretations of Cordelia. The serious challenge that her character poses for the contemporary reader, subject under the conditions of modernity to a secular worldview, is directed first and foremost at her father, the aged and dying king. The challenge consists in weighing the various existential and ethical possibilities evoked by Cordelia's silence. Lear expects to be loved, and he certainly doesn't want to hear his favourite daughter telling him what she cannot say. In the event, silence stages a catastrophic misrecognition based on incommensurable understandings of love. Lear's insistence on being fêted by devoted daughters, coupled with his youngest daughter's refusal to play the pander for the old man, proves disastrous.

The tragedy is of course open to different readings, even as Cordelia's silence admits various meanings. There is no doubt about the 'unhappy ending'. The tragic catastrophe at the heart of Shakespeare's darkest play is ineradicable; further to the shattering of their bond by the old man's folly, father and daughter are reunited only in death. Lear realises too late that he has failed to recognise his daughter's love. But does this mean that the play is ultimately pessimistic? Love isn't necessarily triumphant at the end of the play; but nor is it completely destroyed or ruined. On the contrary, it seems to me that Cordelia's restrictive speech is a sign of unrestricted love, that her silent witness is continuous with her compassionate response to her father's suffering. As such, her silence touches on the transcendent dimension in our ordinary capacity for love, indeed a love that begins in acts of kindness (Everett, 1989, p. 60).

I present this affirmative reading of the play against the background of a central philosophical problem. Paul Ricoeur, in his magisterial *Freud and Philosophy* (1970), sought to identify two opposing directions in our reach for meaning. I am certainly not suggesting that 'critical hermeneutics' is a generally agreed definition of psychoanalysis. Nonetheless, my reading of *Lear* takes its bearings from Ricoeur's (1970, p. 460, passim) account of the Freudian interpretation on the one hand and, on the other, restorative hermeneutics, understood as 'a recollection of the sacred'. The important point is that these interpretative perspectives aren't necessarily incompatible. An interpretation that attempts to 'demystify religion' may be seen as complementary to one that "tries to grasp, in the symbols of faith, a possible call or kerygma" (1970, p. 343). Together, critical and restorative hermeneutics provide a comprehensive understanding of the reach for meaning, including, our anticipation of the future (hope) as well as our sense of the past.

To outline my argument, I begin by locating the general distinction between disenchanted and redemptive readings of *Lear* in terms of

Cordelia's gratuitous love. I don't intend to rehearse the long-standing debate about Lear and the reconciled life. Aside from the perennial wrangle concerning spiritualised interpretations of the play and its tragic hero, I contend that Cordelia's speechless love evokes feelings of hope in a situation that is otherwise subject to despair. The identification of an excess (gratuitous love) beyond disaster sets the scene for a more detailed reading of the conflict of interpretations, starting with Freud and the idea of Cordelia as a figure of death. Freud saw reality as inherently tragic and, in his "The Theme of the Three Caskets" (1913), he advanced a reading of *Lear* along the lines of what we might call tragic, if not ruined love.

A. C. Bradley, on the other hand, was the authoritative source throughout the first half of the twentieth century for the redemptive *King Lear*. Bradley, in his 1904 lectures *Shakespearean Tragedy*, comes to the conclusion that there is indeed "nothing more noble and beautiful in literature than Shakespeare's exposition of the effect of suffering in reviving the greatness and eliciting the sweetness of Lear's nature" (1903, p. 284). However, together with the Bradleyan approach to character, the redemptive reading remains fundamentally out of step with modern literary theory and the all-pervasive scepticism of contemporary critical thought. I accept that the affirmative reading of the play as a journey on Lear's part from power to love needs qualifying (Everett, 1989, p. 60). And yet while Lear himself doesn't reach as far as Cordelia when it comes to an understanding of love, the tragedy is nonetheless replete with unyielding acts of kindness and their redemptive reach. I remain indebted to Bradley, then, for his understanding of the religious and moral dimensions of Shakespearean tragedy.

1

Shakespeare presents us with a portrait of various extremes in *Lear*. The old man wants to be told, as Rowan Williams (2014, p. 37) puts it, that "he is loved immeasurably beyond debt and duty, beyond the ordinary finite exchanges of 'due' affection and loyalty". Cordelia also renders love excessive, but in an entirely different way to her father. In contrast to Lear's self-destructiveness, the gratuitousness of her love, understood as a sign of the sacred, is the starting point for my reflections on Cordelia as a hard act to follow. Whereas the old man hankers after public displays of love and gratitude, Cordelia bears witness to a gratuitous love that is, I suggest, rooted in the affective archaism of the infant's aggressive love coupled with a growing sense of concern.

This is a necessarily personal starting point based on my own experience of the play. I have never come away from a performance of *Lear* over the past 40-odd years, or completed a reading of the text during this period, believing that Cordelia was no more than a corpse in the final scene. I have always felt that there is more at the end of the play, more to come, than the

blank pain of her death. Her reduction to “silence for ever” (Everett, 1989, p. 78) strikes me as a difficult, rather than a conclusive, proposition. Leaving aside the symptomatic reading of my own wishful thinking, like Williams (2016, p. 1), I found my first encounter with *Lear* at senior school “something of a watershed moment”. I remain particularly grateful to my English schoolmaster for this piece of good fortune; in fact, I don’t recall a comparable literary experience either before or since. And I agree with Williams that the play as a whole is shocking, precisely because it doesn’t promise consolation or a straightforward palliative vision. We are shocked by something other than sense issuing from the heart of the human situation.

Cordelia’s profound and compelling silence has nonetheless continued to haunt me as a *lesson* of sorts. Instructive in its very severity, her silence seems to me to raise important questions about the role of the religious and moral imagination in Shakespearean tragedy. I don’t believe that *Lear*’s daughter keeps silent in order to teach her father something, nor that she undertakes to do without her father in a display of righteous arrogance – although I can see how these proposals would find favour in a culture excited by the twin enticements of iconoclasm and the ablation of parental authority. But Cordelia doesn’t scorn her father. She loves him unreservedly. At the same time, she undergoes an ordeal herself, an experience of speechlessness interior to the meaning and value of her character.

In approaching the play, we find ourselves in much the same position as her father – that is, under pressure to make sense of her silence. What does she bring about by keeping silent? What does the silence make of her and of those around her? And to underline the religious aspect of Cordelia’s witness: does the silence admit the breath (*spīritus*) of her life even beyond the end? Anthony Nuttall (2007, p. 312), one of Shakespeare’s most astute readers, poses the problem at its most fundamental: Does Cordelia represent an ‘infinite sweetness’ beyond mundane comprehension? Note the critical transposition of the word ‘sweetness’ from *Lear*’s nature to Cordelia’s in the readings of Bradley and Nuttall, respectively. The overarching distinction between redemptive and disillusioned readings of the play comes to the fore with the evocation of nothingness in Cordelia’s silent witness. The distinction continues to guide readers, theatregoers and critics alike in their approach to the problem of tragic love. Broadly speaking, we find ourselves attempting to make sense of the love between Cordelia and her father from one or other of these two interpretative perspectives.

2

Disenchantment has become something of a modern dogma not only in the sociological tradition of Weber after Nietzsche; but more importantly, perhaps, in light of the Freudian interpretation. The mythological philosophy of Freudian thought rests on the conjunction of tragedy and reality. This is

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evident in Freud's recourse to the figure of 'Ανάγκη (Necessity): "If we are to die ourselves . . . it is easier to submit to a remorseless law of nature, to the sublime 'Ανάγκη, than to a chance which might perhaps have been escaped" (Freud, 1920, p. 45). The reformulation of the 'reality principle' (Freud, 1911) as a mythic figure of necessity provided Freud with a general vantage point from which to view the illusions of human narcissism. The excoriation of illusion is integral to the Freudian interpretation and, approaching *Lear* along these lines, Freud (1913, p. 299) interprets the tragedy with reference to the psychic mechanism of 'wishful reversal' or substitution. By concentrating on Lear's love-test, his fateful whim to divide his inheritance among his three daughters, "in proportion to the amount of love that each of them expresses for him", Freud (1913, p. 292) aims to understand the father's choice as well as the third daughter's identity.

We are considerably advanced in our understanding by Freud's findings regarding the psychological depths of the play. The choice between the three sisters, according to Freud (1913, p. 300), isn't a choice at all, but a matter of necessity: "The free choice between the three sisters is, properly speaking, no free choice, for it must necessarily fall on the third if every kind of evil is not to come about, as it does in *King Lear*". Here, as elsewhere, the Freudian interpretation is unflaggingly comprehensive: whenever the theme of the choice between three women occurs in literature, as it does with the three sisters in *Lear*, "the choice between the women is free, and yet it falls on death" (Freud, 1913, p. 298). On this reading, Lear's ill-fated choice reveals the degree to which his freedom was underwritten by necessity from the beginning. There was only one viable option open to him, which, with tragic consequences, he failed to realise.

The Freudian interpretation underwrites a tragic 'worldview' that admits no consolation; nothing is reconciled into 'sweetness'. Rather, the essential unkindness of life is yoked together with the renunciation or acceptance demanded by reality. As a symbol of a *Weltanschauung*, and not merely the symbol of a "principle of mental functioning", necessity is precisely "the symbol of disillusion" (Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 327–328). On Freud's (1913, p. 299) reckoning "the first duty of all living beings" consists in "tolerating life", and insofar as "it makes this harder for us", illusion is seen to have little or no value. Thus, in *Lear*'s case, Freud emphasises the shattering of illusion in terms of the old man's struggle towards the acceptance of reality with resignation.

What does this make Cordelia? Essentially, Freud sees Lear's daughter – indeed, as "the fairest and most desirable" of the three sisters – as a representation of death. She appears as such, according to Freud, in a twofold disguise – namely, as the object of her father's so-called free choice and, second, as a comparable figure to the Aphrodite of the Judgement of Paris, the Goddess of Love, in her role as his "one loyal daughter" (Freud, 1913, p. 298), the only one of his three daughters who really loved him. The detail

as well as the method of Freud's interpretation rests on an analogy in which dreams and works of literature are seen as capable of fulfilling wishes in fantasised form. Freud (1913, p. 295) 'transposes' his interpretation of the choice between three sisters from "the language of dreams" to "the mode of expression" used in a primaeval myth that Shakespeare reworks in his play. Consequently, for Freud the wishful reversal of choice and necessity is played out in Shakespeare's tragedy alongside the reversal of love and death.

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Freud (1913, pp. 294–295) interprets the conjunction of love and silence, in its wider mythological context, as a defining characteristic of the 'excellent third' woman or sister. Moreover, drawing on the symbolism of death in Stekel's *Die Sprache des Traumes* (1911), he proposes that 'dumbness' so defined is "a common representation of death". Having arrived at these basic propositions (on the strength of the analogy between dreams and scenes from myths and fairy tales), Freud (1913, p. 296) is confident that he knows who the three sisters are and why the choice must fall on the third:

the third one of the sisters between whom the choice is made is . . . Death itself, the Goddess of Death . . . the sisters are [therefore] known to us. They are the Fates, the Moerae, the Parcae or the Norns [cf. the virgin goddesses of fate in Norse mythology], the third of whom is called Atropos, the inexorable.

Lear and Cordelia (father and daughter) are thus bound together, at the very heart of the tragedy, through resignation to the inexorable.

Crucially, the necessity of death is revealed in the guise of Cordelia's "speechless love" (1913, p. 293). In saying what cannot be said, Cordelia falls silent. At this point, driven by an analytic imperative aimed at exposing our susceptibility to illusion, Freud bases his interpretation on the underlying mechanism of wishful substitution. He interprets the silence as a symbol of death, where the "fairest and best of women . . . has taken the place of the Death-goddess" (1913, p. 300) in the same way that choice stands in place of necessity. The two aspects of Freud's interpretation (i.e. regarding the father's fateful decision and the daughter's real identity) come together in and through the play of illusion-disillusionment. Freud argues that our wishes substitute for death its contrary (i.e. love and beauty) in accordance with the primaeval identity of life and death in the myth of the Great Goddess. The most beautiful woman is seen as the substitute for death, in particular, as the figure of death for the aged patriarch who adamantly refuses "to renounce the love of women" and, indeed, insists to the extreme point of madness "on hearing how much he is loved" (1913, p. 301).

Freud proposes that the third figure of woman, who comes after both the mother and the partner modelled on the pattern of the mother, appears as the

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figure of Death itself. Under the heading of pitiless realism, the final verdict of the Freudian interpretation is unequivocal: “the third of the Fates alone, the silent Goddess of Death, will take [us] into her arms” (Freud, 1913, p. 301). And yet Freud leaves a crucial question unanswered here, concerning the ‘regressive revision’ that he attributes to the primaeval myth of the Death-goddess – disguised and distorted by wishful illusion. Should this obscurity be counted as a lapse? It certainly points to a matter of some psychological significance. Does the aged and dying father “renounce love, choose death and make friends with the necessity of dying” (Freud, 1913, p. 301) through regression to the primordial figure of the mother? Are we meant to understand the figure of Mother Earth in these terms? Is this the figure that Lear has to acknowledge, the lesson he has to learn? Is the old man supposed to come to terms with reality at the hands of the mother who receives him at the end? Are we meant to understand Cordelia as a hard act to follow in these terms?

In one sense, Freud would have us extend the meaning of the ‘common mother’ (cf. *Timon of Athens*, IV. iii. 178) to death itself. Alternatively, his interpretation allows for the possibility that the illusion of primary love shatters, that the regressive tendency towards imaginary infantile love is subject to a violent and transformative disillusioning – precisely, at the point where woman becomes the figure of death for man. The ambiguity is left unresolved in Freud’s text. There may be no other way of approaching the matter, insofar as the absent mother, necessarily disguised, haunts Freud’s interpretation no less than the play itself. In any event, Freud (1913, p. 301) posits a formidable figure in the guise of Cordelia, where the old man’s wish to be loved as he was in his mother’s arms comes to nothing – “Thou’lt come no more. / Never, never, never, never, never” (V. iii. 283–284). In the name of reality, the Freudian interpretation thus emphasises what *King Lear* records at its most pessimistic – “No, no, no life” (V. iii. 281). Silence is seen as a figure of absolute tragedy.

4

The Shakespearean discrimination of course isn’t confined to negative evaluations and speechless despair. Whether or not Freud opts for tragic fatalism is a moot point; the option, however, is definitively ruled out in Shakespearean tragedy by the possibility of “a consciousness . . . of solemnity in the mystery we cannot fathom” (Bradley, 1905, p. 279). Rowan Williams (2016, p. 26) comes to much the same conclusion, regarding the reach of the ‘tragic imagination’ and its liturgical setting – it must repeatedly show us “what we do not know and cannot know . . . reconnecting us with whatever possibility we still possess of building the sacred into our politics”. For Williams, as for Bradley, *Lear* performs the essential work of tragedy, classical and modern, as the affirmation of a future (an inner future) beyond

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the enactment of catastrophic collapse. There is no question that pain matters, and matters profoundly, in the evaluation of human life. Freud was right about that. But tragedy also provokes us to work through loss and, thereby to learn, by means of a decidedly difficult love, what pain does *not* take away from the world.

Turning to restoration and the reclamation of the sacred, Bradley (1903, p. 317) is the canonical source not only for the redemptive *King Lear*, but also for the reading of Cordelia as “a thing enskyed and sainted” (cf. *Measure for Measure*, I. iv. 33). Where does this reading take us? In particular, what does it tell us about Cordelia’s capacity for love? Shakespeare presents us with a difficulty in the form of a paradox, when it comes to Cordelia’s excessive speechlessness. Bradley (1903, p. 316), with characteristic critical acumen, suggests ‘paucity of expression’ as both the form and function of Cordelia’s speech, which he sees as commensurate with the ‘infinite beauty’ of her character. This strikes me as a strong and indispensable reading. While she is undoubtedly expressive and fluent as the occasion demands; we would, I think, be wrong to approach Cordelia as eloquent by nature (Everett 1989, p. 78). Indeed, I wish to retain the idea of restrictive speech as a signifier of unrestricted love. At the same time, I should like to suggest something more than a deliberate avoidance of ‘expansive speech’ on Shakespeare’s part. My argument is that Cordelia *holds her tongue*, beyond both internal and external restrictions, as a positive enactment of gratuitous love.

The conflict of interpretations pivots on the idea of *speechlessness* – indeed, Lear unwittingly homes in with prophetic accuracy on the nature of his daughter’s silence, instructing her with foolhardy imperiousness to ‘mend’ her speech (I. i. 97). How right and wrong the old man is in issuing his patriarchal injunction. Alongside his obsessive preoccupation with ingratitude, the king proves himself ungracious with his own misplaced talk of mending. Reparation is clearly wide of the mark. Cordelia’s silence does amount to a kind of broken speech. And yet far from the want of mending, her speechlessness stands in its very brokenness as an irreducible manifestation of love. She isn’t confined to no more than “a stubborn stammering” (Everett 1989, p. 78). On the contrary, by ‘broken speech’ I mean a kind of distress, a speech that is always replete with agony and, in keeping with its function as a significant sign, a simultaneously confident and vulnerable mode of address.

The paradox of broken speech is apparent from the opening scene of the play, where Cordelia’s symbolic standing is determined by what cannot be said. The play effectively takes its bearings from this inaugural manifestation of speechlessness. Something breaks out at the beginning, which constitutes the beginning itself as an excess, an interruption of the closed system of exchange that Lear would have his daughters re-enact in the name of love and gratitude. Like Antigone, in this respect at least, Cordelia stands by what

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exceeds her. As such, she evokes a relation to the law that is no longer or primarily tragic. Her announcement of love *for nothing* exceeds her father's patriarchal embrace; it falls towards or away from the 'broken middle' in the form – implicit but actual – of what Gillian Rose (1996) called "inaugurated mourning". To put it more simply, *Lear* reveals the extent to which the work of mourning overruns the tragic imagination; not everything in the play comes under the heading of ruined love.

Based on this inaugural enactment of speechlessness, silence subsequently assumes both positive and negative value as the central dilemma of *Lear* – indeed, where the worst is yet to come: "And worse I may be yet. The worst is not / So long as we can say 'This is the worst'" (IV. ii. 27–28). The work of the negative continues to haunt the action of the drama with its relentless emptying and undoing. Accordingly, the action proceeds towards the "dread summit" of England's "chalky bourn" (IV. v. 57), where Gloucester gropes in unraised darkness on the threshold of Milton's "void profound" (*Paradise Lost*, II. 438). The worst – "th' extreme verge" (IV. v. 26) – remains always no more than a step away; negation and cessation are a constant threat, alongside the horror of an empty end.

Nevertheless, the forces of good hold up not only in Cordelia, but also in Edgar, Kent, and the Fool. Following Lear's death, Albany, in a final attempt to stay the negative, assigns the order of things to Edgar and Kent. He does so in the name of the "gored state" (V. iii. 296) and its future. It turns out that Kent has had enough and, in any case, appears to be otherwise obligated – by what or to whom isn't entirely clear. Although of course the king had been his *raison d'être*; more than a feeling for authority, Kent is motivated by love of his sovereign: "My life I never held but as a pawn / To wage against thine [Lear's] enemies" (I. i. 155–156). And it is, he tells us at the end, his "master" who calls him (V. iii. 298). It is down to Edgar, then, to assume the obligation of the future as a burden of "this sad time" (V. ii. 299), and we rely on his feel for life – his natural buoyancy and religious soul (Bradley, 1905, pp. 306–307) – in taking on this task.

The watchword for the play, I suggest, is contained in the variously defined and contested meanings of 'not-yet', or what Ricœur (1970, p. 551) calls "the evocation of possibility". Consequently, we can compare the modern Freudian education to reality with the more expansive reach of the Shakespearean imagination. The latter calls for a philosophical frame of reference that is adequate not only to what is possible (*kata to dynaton*), but also to what might become possible (*dynámei on*). What failure doesn't break, what is yet-to-come, is at least as important as the breakdown that occurs under the weight of failure and loss. Thus, further to the idea of tragedy as resignation to cruel necessity (an idea common to Freud and Schopenhauer), the evocation of possibility presupposes a determined use of language in which "I leave off all demands and listen" (1970, p. 551). Cordelia enacts this way of listening more fully than anyone else in the play.

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While there is no guarantee of educative consolation, nonetheless, her silent witness is attentive to that which is yet-to-come (the inner future), to the potentiality as well as the antecedents of “this sad time”.

The temporal burden of past and present (“this time . . .”), which is weighed in the activity of listening under the sign of the future, issues essentially from Cordelia’s initial insistence on “Nothing” (I. i. 89). In effect, Cordelia appropriates Lear’s ‘nothing’ at its most brutal, the dreadful casting off of “paternal care” (I. i. 113) and the reduction of his daughter to non-existence: “Better thou / Had’st not been born than not t’have pleased me better” (V. i. 233–234). Whereas Lear’s destructive love makes ‘nothing’ of his daughter; her ‘nothing’ in turn remains integral to her love. Nothingness, therefore, isn’t simply privative, but functions in the wider context of the play as the condition for the possibility of anticipation. Lear is of course immediately impatient with the situation in which he finds himself placed by the calling up of nothingness; he demonstrates a passion for *not* listening: “Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again” (I. i. 90). Impatience as an obstacle to grace returns, most notably by way of Kafka,¹ as among the most trenchant themes of modernism. Cordelia, for her part, promises a more tolerant, less persecuted attitude towards nothingness which, in the context of the play, allows for the future-to-come.

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Cordelia’s attentive, inner stillness is, I suggest, consistent with the phenomenon of prayer. Prayer is always a reach beyond merely privative silence towards a presence of some kind. As an enactment of inwardness, in which one is taught by what cannot be said, listening and keeping silent go together with speech. Once again, speechlessness isn’t a figure of “absolute tragedy” (Steiner, 1992) or irredeemable negation. This is certainly true of Shakespearean tragedy, where speech and silence are never simple opposites. The fact is that speech alone can (by the enactment of what doesn’t go into words) “transform silence into an act of presence, and not into privation” (Chrénien, 2000, p. 160). Cordelia says what she can: “Good my lord, / You have begot me, bred me, loved me. / I return those duties back as are right fit – / Obey you, love you, and most honour you” (I. i. 95–98). The repetition of ‘you’ frames a genuine expression of sentiment towards paternal authority, even as it places Cordelia in “the Court complex of power, love and honour” (Everett, 1989, p. 75). At which point, the princess falls silent, leaving ‘nothing’ (as it were) to speak for itself.

The broken speech of a love unutterable is open to any number of readings. I wish to emphasise the religious meaning of this gesture and, moreover, to point out that Lear follows his daughter’s example only in extremis with his pivotal prayer for “Poor naked wretches” (III. iv. 28). Even as his daughter falls silent, Lear prays for the wretched of the earth. This

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seems to me a viable reading of Cordelia's silence: continuous with her compassionate response to her father's suffering, her silent witness represents an austere and binding expression of loving relatedness. Together, witness and response remain a hard act to follow. In stark contrast to the idle speech of Lear's two ungrateful daughters, Cordelia's prayerful silence betokens a gratuitous love. As a mark of respect, adoration and thanksgiving, in accordance with the *favete linguis* (the facilitation of the ritual acts by keeping silent), silence appears before the other and for him. How, exactly, does this differ from idle speech? [Chrétien \(2000\)](#) describes the interior dialogue of prayer, understood as the religious phenomenon par excellence, in terms of what he calls "destined speech". Comparable to my understanding of broken speech, he posits the "wounded word" of prayer in terms of "a silence before You" – "The silence of prayer is here a silence *heard* by God; it is still and always dialogue, and can be so only because a first silence, different and purely privative, was broken" ([2000](#), p. 160).

Similarly, the audience 'hears' Cordelia's love in the silence. The silence of broken speech is a breaking out of itself towards compassionate response, what Williams (2016, p. 26) describes as "a showing of the sacred". Compare if you will Iago's recourse to silence with Cordelia's broken speech: "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word" (V. ii. 309–310). Notwithstanding the profusion of unalloyed evil in *Lear*, indeed, to a greater degree than in any of Shakespeare's other tragedies; Coleridge's celebrated annotation on Iago's "motiveless malignity" (i.e. the thoroughly ineffable evil of Othello's perverse opponent) denotes a nihilism unsurpassed in Shakespeare. Nothingness thus repeats itself *ad nauseam* in a decidedly privative silence. In this case, Lear's proclamation that nothing will come of nothing proves dreadfully accurate, and as such is echoed in Regan's cruel-hearted calculation: "What need one?" (II. ii. 437). The comparison makes the point in the most extreme terms: Iago's solipsistic collapse into nihilism counts alongside the hideous brutality of Regan's destructive narcissism, which voids life and has nothing to pass on.

By contrast, broken speech issues from the call (*ekklēsia*) of prayerfulness, its address to 'You' – "whereso'er you are" (III. iv. 28) – is inscribed in the ecclesiology of Our Father ([Chrétien 2000](#), p. 155). To underline my main argument, Cordelia's love is imbued with a transcendent meaning by virtue of its gratuitousness. This is certainly an excessive gesture, but one that evokes nothingness at the opposite end of the spectrum to nihilism. [Williams \(2007\)](#), p. 68) lends weight to this argument by drawing attention to the way in which we show God's love to one another in a boundless way – "God never *starts* being in loving relationship; it's an aspect of what he is eternally". Cordelia effectively stakes her claim on these uncompromising grounds. Together with the broken speech ('wounded word') of prayerful silence, the traditional Aristotelian distinction between

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kata to dynaton and *dynámei on* illuminates the meaning of the inner future in *Lear*.

None of the survivors achieves a comparable quality of inwardness to Cordelia, who, by the end of the play, bestows an essential vitality on the ambivalent future as it appears in the gap opened up by Edgar and Albany. Lear remains confined to the end by his “monolithic inwardness” (Exerdt, 1981, p. 63); whereas Cordelia, beyond Kent’s “promised end” (V. iii. 38), confirms the positive evaluation of what is yet to come. The latter is bequeathed through the conjunction of love and silence: “What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent” (I. i. 62). A hard act to follow indeed. On this stern reckoning, a silence surrounds us where we live, love and work – which presents a daunting prospect from any perspective.

6

By holding her tongue, Cordelia exposes her father as morally and psychologically immature; but he is also a gullible and soft-hearted old man. Lear wishes to be loved even as he loves himself. This doesn’t make him corrupt, and nothing leads us to think of him as a base or disgraceful figure. Nevertheless, his imperious demand turns on a basic fault and, in hankering after his own narcissistic image in the eyes of his daughters, vanity gets the better of the old man with disastrous results. Importantly, Lear is in conflict with himself before the violent collision with his daughters erupts and drives him mad. He is undone, the calamities and catastrophe ensue, on condition that he acts from an inward sense of inconsolability prior to his madness. We can speculate about his deep-seated incapacity to mourn; in any case, something troubles Lear who, even at his best, is given to “hideous rashness” (I. i. 151). This raises an important question. It isn’t clear what order of necessity connects inward and outward reality in Lear’s case. We don’t know what motivates his fatal decision to divide Britain between two hypocritical daughters and, at the same time, to banish Cordelia, his abiding third daughter, and faithful Kent.

Furthermore, we are no clearer to begin with about the direction of the play than we are about the motive forces – by the end of the First Act, we have yet to discover the consequences of Lear’s actions. In fact, the inner conflict (which represents the hero’s tragic character) is revealed, in retrospect, by the calamities and complications of the external conflict – including, the dramatic doings of Lear’s daughters and Kent (incognito) as regards the main plot, and of Gloucester and his two sons regarding the secondary plot. The doubling of the action along these lines, at the primordial level of what we might call deep family relations, drives home the impression of a bleak, irredeemable world. Dramatically speaking, at least, the play turns upon the appalling characters of Goneril, Regan and Edmund, all of whom are intent on causing harm or doing evil. Lear’s

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internal reactions, the passions of his tormented soul, continue to unfold in relation to those around him whose outward actions signify their monstrous cruelty. To be clear, the tragedy rests on Lear's decision to divide the kingdom, and to make the division dependent on public displays of love from his three daughters: who loves best gets most. As the action unfolds, however, Lear suffers as much as he acts, and his suffering comes about on account of enormous cruelty.

The representation of inner and outer conflict is different in Cordelia's case. Most importantly, unlike Lear she recognises helplessness itself – her own and her father's fallibility – from the standpoint of mature and restorative consolation: "O my dear father, restoration hang / Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss / Repair those violent harms that my two sisters / Have in thy reverence made" (IV. vi. 22–25). As a symbol of love rooted in kind-heartedness, this singular metaphor of reparation is turned towards her father's tyrannical destructiveness – as well as the depravity of the "unnatural hags" (II. ii. 452), Cordelia's two sisters – without the least trace of vengeful intent. She is simply more mature and kinder than her father. In what seems to me the most decisive of the many reversals that structure Shakespeare's central poetic work, the difficulty of living up to his daughter's *exemplum* is the existential proof of Lear's breakdown. He fails to see love for what it is, and whether this failure is the consequence or condition of his impatience – either way, it is only when he has learnt patience (and unlearned hatred) that the old man can take a proper measure of his daughter's maturity.

In a sense, we are all in the old man's shoes; we share Lear's central dilemma in having to repeatedly sort out the difference between regressive imaginary love (i.e. how one would like to be seen and to see oneself) and the symbolic import of mature love. Shakespeare sharpens the distinction between the imaginary and symbolic registers by emphasising the conjunction of love and silence, or what Freud (1913, p. 293) called "speechless love". As the immediate catalyst of Lear's catastrophic disappointment, his daughter's unswerving silence takes love beyond the reflection of a narcissistic image. Exactly how far 'beyond', and in what direction, Cordelia's love extends is my theme in this chapter. Lear is put under pressure by his daughter's steadfast gesture; without degenerating into debilitating inhibition or hysterical misery, the young woman's evocation of nothingness haunts the action of the drama from beginning to end. We can sympathise with her father's bewilderment. There is I think something almost incomprehensible, an ungraspable excess, in Cordelia's singular tolerance of nothingness. On the basis of a certain "intertwining of the human and divine calls" (Chrètien, 2006, p. 164), her response, from beginning to end, presupposes a call that continues to reverberate in excess of whatever it is thought to mean.

The play is framed by Cordelia's silence as the action moves from her "Nothing" at the beginning to her death at the end. To begin with, she admits that her love is "More ponderous than [her] tongue" (I. i. 78), that she "cannot heave / [Her] heart into [her] mouth" (I. i. 91–92). Announcing her love in terms of what cannot be said, she supports her claim to this effect with reference to what is right and fit, refusing to say anything more than her filial "bond" (I. i. 93) dictates. Together with the mutual ties of blood, the symbolic meaning of love is thus acknowledged by means of the rhetorical figure of apophasis (i.e. saying something by stating that you will not mention it). The young woman knows that she owes herself to her father, even in ways she cannot express or that he cannot fathom. She owes him "a debt of unreserved attention and love, and an excess of involvement, care, disregarding calculation altogether" (Williams, 2016, p. 51). She says as much at the point where speech falls silent. And the paradox of silent witness deepens with her death. The sudden entrance of Lear, with his daughter's dead body in his arms, leaves us at a loss on so many levels, faced with what Freud (1911, p. 301) described as "one of the culminating points of tragedy in modern drama". No matter how often one has seen or read the play, this harrowing image remains thoroughly shocking. The old man dies in turn and, seemingly in a state of joy, commands the onlookers to "Look on her. Look, her lips. / Look there, look there" (V. iii. 286–287).

What are we supposed to be looking at? Opposing worldviews come sharply into focus here. Does the old man believe his daughter is still alive? Are we meant to read apprehensions of hope in his command? Or is this a last defence against blank pain? It is worth pursuing Freud's interpretation a little further. *Lear* is a play about paternal hubris as much as filial ingratitude, in which Gloucester's torment on muddling good and evil (Edgar and Edmund) mirrors Lear's suffering as a consequence of his own misguided judgement. At the same time, it stages the father's death as resignation to necessity. In following the action of the drama (Lear's belated realisation of Cordelia's irrefutable love), we find ourselves witness to the inner workings of a seemingly inexorable order of reality. Lear is purged, but dies enfeebled nonetheless; similarly, Gloucester is blinded in a grotesque display of brutality that cannot be undone. Adversity, at this level of extremity, seems irredeemable. The Freudian interpretation proves itself on the grounds that catastrophe marks the *terminus ad quem* of Shakespearean tragedy. Kent thus pronounces, in an appropriately solemn tone, on the old man's departing spirit – "let him pass. He hates him / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer" (V. iii. 289–291). In Kent's thoroughly trustworthy estimation, the end requires only as much time as it takes for the ruined sovereign to be gone. There is no call for an aftermath, no reprise, nothing to reclaim in compensation.

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And yet if we allow for the “unbearable joy” (Bradley, 1903, p. 291) of Lear’s last speech (as I think we should), this creates a very different impression of the old man. We see him now illuminated in his daughter’s radiance. This isn’t a sign of madness. Lear is finally drawn towards Cordelia’s evocation of nothingness. Once again, I don’t mean to say that things end happily. The play turns out to be immensely sad. Nevertheless, we do, I believe, feel somehow enlivened at the end, or as Bradley (1903, p. 292) puts it, that “everything external has become nothing to [Lear], and that what remains is ‘the thing itself’, the soul in its bare greatness”. One need not necessarily draw an analogy here to the narrative of Christian redemption, but the humiliation that issues from the very ignobility of Cordelia’s death by hanging is lifted up through a combined sense of joy and bare humanity. As he lays his daughter’s body down, the mention of her “breath” (V. iii. 237) allows for the possibility of a vital link beyond the old man’s delusions. In the humane vision of the tragic imagination, the breath of life anticipates the future to come. This is how I read the end of the play: Cordelia has managed to turn her father’s “offices of nature” and “dues of gratitude” (II. ii. 351–352) profoundly inward, embodying the silence without reserve in a religious atmosphere of spiritual grace.

This suggests a very different kind of boundary concerning the father–daughter relationship in conjunction with ‘the mystery of resurrection’ (Aspöqvist, 2016, p. 119) and the restoration of love. *Lear* thus announces and inaugurates a preoccupation that marks Shakespeare’s final period, the period of *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *The Tempest*. As we have seen, there is an aspect of prayerfulness in Cordelia’s falling silent to begin with, a quality which extends its reach through her compassionate response to her father’s suffering – “For thee, oppressed King, I am cast down, / Myself could else outfrown false fortune’s frown” (V. iii. 5–6) – to the symbol of her death at the end of the play. In this respect, Shakespeare presents us with a character who, in the profound continuity of her witness and response, calls for something more restorative than the Freudian dispossession of consciousness. At once silent and compassionate, Cordelia lights the path of bare humanity that Lear painfully works his way towards throughout the course of the play. Shakespeare, in other words, presents us with someone whose capacity for love reaches her father in a final agony of ecstasy, and who may yet open “the door to a future even when we can see no hope” (Williams, 2007, p. 44).

In conclusion, the Freudian interpretation of the Death-goddess gets us only so far in our appreciation of *Lear*. Further to the critique of illusion, a vital belief in the world announces itself in a love that falls silent to begin with. What cannot be said, in this case, speaks of our situation in the sacred. No less daunting than Lear’s “O without a figure” (I. iv. 174–175), Cordelia’s transcendent rendering of “Nothing” (I. i. 89) goes beyond words (she stands by what cannot be said), but also beyond the eloquence of

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silence. She cannot, nor would she wish to, put words to her father's worldly demand for repayment, a return for *his* generosity towards her and her two sisters. And yet for all that, I don't think Shakespeare means to turn silence into a rhetorical ploy. Cordelia doesn't credit Lear's notion of gratitude, even while he remains insanelly blind to hers. Averse to considerations of reciprocity or repayment, in matters of the 'heart' at least (I. i. 104), the child embodies a deeper sense of grace, and a more profound understanding of kindness than her father is able to reach in his person. In this respect, far from a type of persuasive speech, her broken restrictive speech interrupts the exchange of gifts. Cordelia thus defers the catastrophic collapse of meaning that is otherwise all-pervasive in this darkest of Shakespeare's poems.

Notes

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! Quotations from Shakespeare in this chapter are based upon the edition of Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (1987); and I refer throughout to its numeration of acts, scenes and lines.

! See Chapter 10 of this book.